

Cry, the Peacock: Portrayal of Feminine and Masculine Doctrines

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“Above all, be the heroine of your life, not the victim.”

- Nora Ephron

Contemporary women value individualism and persist to safeguard it. The sensitively apprehensive, socially vibrant surroundings often turn out to be lethal to the establishment and progress of strong interpersonal relationships. Deprived of a sense of individuality the majority of women feel psychologically debilitated to face life. Unable to resist the assault of the external world, they waft towards solitude, seclusion, obsession, or death. Female marginality, psychic and spiritual despondency, wrecked marital relationships, concealed sexuality or the disillusioned endeavors of establishing individualism are some of the tribulations touched upon by women writers like Anita Desai.

Anita Desai is one of the most admired contemporary Indian novelists writing in English. She is more concerned with contemplation, passion, and consciousness. As Kanwar says, the trait of Desai's fiction is “to focus on the inner experience of life” (71). According to Desai, most marriages confirm to be blending of incompatibility. Men are pertinent to be rational and matter of fact while women are schmalzy. Naturally they look at things in different ways and respond in a different way to identical situations.

Anita Desai's novels are the manifesto of female predicament. Her obsession with the woman's private world, annoyance, and tornado rampant within her mind intensify her predicament. Desai's concern with the liberation of woman is found page after page in her novels. Human distinctiveness is usually linked to and defined by societal and cultural standards. When it comes to woman, she is defined only in relation to a man as she is deprived of an individuality of her own. It is easy to unshackle woman in a primeval societal composition even if she is uneducated but it is very hard to think of her freedom in a society which is moving forward at the path of evolution and civilization. But hearty appreciation to the Women's studies which are rising fast and paying consideration to the female predicament in a male subjugated set up. Woman has always been measured as an accomplice to man. No autonomous survival has been

allotted to her. Frail, submissive, imprudent, fat-headed are a few of myriad adjectives endorsed to her. Her natal features are coupled with her providence. She is laden with a conventional role and cramped within the four walls of the house. Simon de Beauvoir puts it in a precise way in *The Second Sex*, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (295).

The present paper aspires to study the tribulations faced by women in Indian society which, indubitably, is marching in advance at the path of evolution but still consigns customary roles to women. Women cannot come out of these customary roles because of the conservative outlook of the male dominated society. She is incarcerated within the four walls of the house where there is no one else to share her anguish. Even if she is offered with the material comforts, she endeavors hard to let others give attention to her misery which goes unheard in most of the cases. It spotlights on how the marital disharmony between Maya and Gautama in *Cry, the Peacock* results in paroxysm in Maya. Anita Desai infiltrates into the frenzied world of Maya's perception and psychic states caused by her melancholic fixation with death. Desai makes Maya her mouthpiece to express her views about woman. As Cixous says, “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies (78).”

Cry, the Peacock illustrates the failure of marriage between Maya and Gautama. Maya marries Gautama who is quite elder in age to her. She marries Gautama as she finds a surrogate father in him. The early part of her married life is somewhat happy. Later, they both are utterly opposed to each other in their disposition and emotional responses. Maya suffers from a mystifying premonition about the disastrous end of her marriage. She trusts that either she or her husband would die in the fourth year of their marriage. The heaviness of the prediction threatens to explode her married life. Maya's fear is provoked as she fails to communicate to Gautama because of the communication gap between them. They live in diverse worlds.

Maya is an instinctive woman of fervor and sentiment. She longs for love and life of involvement. There is a striving on her part to land at a more genuine way of life than the one which is offered to her. She wants Gautama to love her intensely, for his love would provide significance to her existence and facilitate her to accomplish her desires. She asks him: "Is there nothing; I whispered, is there nothing in you that would be touched, ever, so slightly if I told you I live my life for you?" (114). Hence Gautama, a rational thinker who believes in the values of objectivity gets annoyed at this query. Maya feels estranged and reinforces her sense of isolation. She is neither able to acquire companionship from him, nor physical, sexual fulfillment. Rajeshwar pertinently depicts their divergence: "Maya expects some emotional and physical satisfaction in married life but both of them are denied to her, one by Gautama's cold intellectuality and the other by his age" (241). This is because Maya and Gautama are disparate to each other and both of them symbolize the fringes of feminine and masculine doctrines.

Opposing to the outlook of Maya, Gautama has a mechanical attitude towards life. This incompatibility of temperament causes unfathomable hostility in the mentality of the protagonist, Maya, and she becomes extremely abnormal. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar writes: "Her intensity-whether she is sane, hysterical or insane-fills the whole book and gives it form as well as life (468)". Because of their psychological make-ups Maya and Gautama do not share anything at the emotional level. Even on a physical level, they hardly get pleasure in any spontaneity. Even when they make love, it is an involuntary, formal ritual executed in a loveless manner.

Gripped in his hectic schedule, Gautama prolongs to toil late in the night. This makes him both psychologically and physically exhausted to meet the conjugal expectations of his wife. Maya endures the torment of her disgruntled desires thus: "Telling me to go to sleep while he worked at his papers, he did not give another thought to me, to either the soft, willing body or the lonely wanting mind that waited near his bed" (9). Bitterly thwarted by Gautama, Maya has no one or nothing to turn to. According to S. Gunasekaran:

When a woman is caught in the trap of marriage, she has only one way left
that is to languish in misery. Somehow she reveals an evident lack of trust in
marriage and marital relationships. Every attempt a woman makes to redefine
herself inevitably ends up in lack of
communication. This leads them to
alienation. (285)

Even when Maya deliberately strives to deflect herself from her agony, Gautama does not help her at all. Once she suggests Gautama to take her to south as she wants to see the Kathakali dances. But Gautama says: "If that is your only reason for wanting to go all the way south, I suggest you wait till a Kathakali troupe comes to give a performance in Delhi . . ." (23). This physical, psychological, and emotional severance tortures Maya.

The duo lives a loveless cage of marriage in which Maya's poignant urges get trampled by Gautama's idealistic gibberish. Maya snivels under the weight of Gautama's borrowed astuteness as he frequently quotes from *The Bhagavad Gita* to demonstrate to her his scholarly supremacy. To Maya life is a vivacious, excruciating possibility while for Gautama it is an obvious, accurate and tangible truth. It is their option of living on diverse planes that refutes them a genuine understanding. Maya and Gautama stand poles apart in their attitude to life. Their diversity disjoins them from each other and slams them to a lifeless relationship. As Srinivasa Iyengar says, "What is real to her is shadowy to him. What are facts and hard realities to him have no interest for her" (466).

All that Maya ever pines for, perishes quickly. She desires to be loved but also defies surrender and attachment. Surrender of the self surfaces to her to be subtraction from her individual sovereignty and completeness. Her life appears to her as an eternal tale of partition and lovelessness as she commences to lose everything just after her marriage. Her melancholy is not linked to the reality of her conditions; it is a product of her own perception.

Maya's gloom is in part related to the procedure of her growing up. She has led a confined life and has been brought up on fantasies, and now when confronted with the actuality of life and its disillusionment, she is powerless to face it. She misses the company of her father, his optimistic and friendly attitude. She is devastatingly stunned to see her father turning impervious to her after her marriage to Gautama. Overpowered by human beings, she tries to latch on to her pet Toto, but it too dies unexpectedly. Toto's death triggers off a set of responses and becomes a reason for her present desolation. But even while mourning his death, it is not tears which ease her but "a fit of furious pillow beating, kicking, everything but crying" (9). With a child's yearning for solace she wishes to be assured that all will be well. But this kind of assertion is not offered to her. This deteriorates the condition and Toto's death fills her with trepidation of the indefinite: "Something slipped into my tear hazed vision, a shadowy something that prodded me into admitting that it was not my pet's death alone that I mourned today, but another sorrow, unremembered,

perhaps as yet not even experienced and filled me with this despair” (8).

Maya's qualms of the actual are projected through her withdrawal from her environs. She visualizes them as having an authority and a vigor they do not have and locks herself within a concealed world. Maya thrusts into problems as she fails to do or deliver anything meaningful. Her household is run by the servants around leaving her idle and more tuned to developing her neurosis. The lack of activity thus renders her unoccupied and more conducive to mental nervousness and anxieties.

To append to her melancholy, Maya happens to be a childless woman, deprived thus of a prospect of a healthy, spontaneous outlet for her feelings. Her life thus suffers from a dreadful eventlessness. Unoccupied, despised, and unaccompanied Maya begins to hallucinate things. The world of her aspirations falls apart and she begins to lose her sanity. Her inability and indisposition to unburden her heart to Gautama lead to her mania with her uncertainties, her delirium, and finally her psychosis.

A sense of gloom, a threat for an imminent disaster chokes Maya. She is dogged by the prophecy of the astrologer who predicted her husband's or her own death. If she were given a healthy, spontaneous and occupied routine, she would have shrugged aside the fears of the prophecy. Since nothing significant takes place in her life she plunges deep into a life of miserable existences of bizarre fantasies and nightmares.

It is Gautama who exacerbates Maya's annoyance. He repudiates to come out of his cocooned shell of intellectuality and falls short to see Maya's mounting desperation. Maya's rootlessness keeps on escalating every day. It culminates in a kind of schizophrenia. Destined to live a life of physical, emotional, and spiritual loneliness, Maya becomes frantic. Her conscious mind makes her apprehend that they are not made for misfortune, while her unconscious mind moves towards thoughts of murder. So Maya hurls down her husband into death in a blinding instant of excruciating woe which echoes the building up of paroxysm in Maya. She has become the tool of her own fanatical destiny. It is a reflection of her impulse of belligerence which comes to the surface. Three days later in a well-developed paroxysm, Maya jumps off the balcony of her ancestral house in Lucknow and meets with an instant death. Thus Maya, as her name implies, becomes a victim of her own illusion.

The novel portrays Maya's confrontation between life and death and her inability to accept them as they are. In her closed world, pity and fear merge to develop into horror not compassion – where the emotional fears she experience blur her sensibility. She fails to rise up and denies to live or to love. She is a

quintessence of pure instinct without the essential accompaniment of insight Maya's life reflects the quotation from *The Bhagavad Gita* quoted by Gautama: “From attachment arises longing and from longing anger is born. From anger arises delusion, loss of memory is caused. From loss of memory, the discriminative faculty is ruined and from the ruin of discrimination he perishes” (118).

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